

**Kathryn Tanner & Miroslav Volf:
On Their Trinitarian-Theological Visions for Congregational Life**

In their books, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Triune God* and *Christ is Key*, respectively, Miroslav Volf and Kathryn Tanner engage classical Trinitarian thinking in intellectually fresh and critical ways. Underlying their ambitious and rather dense academic work, however, is an impassioned vision for what Christian congregational life can be, given the reality of the Holy Trinity. In this short paper, I hope to compare and contrast their respective visions, and the path by which each takes to get there.

To begin, it is important to affirm that both of our subject theologians share a common longing for congregational life that is experientially indicative of the divine. Volf opens his fifth chapter, *Trinity and the Church*, assuming the thesis that “ecclesial communion should correspond to trinitarian communion.”¹

Similarly, Tanner builds her chapter on *Trinitarian Life* upon the previous three which focused on human nature and the “grace [of God it] was meant to enjoy.”² For both Volf and Tanner, the Trinity is a wondrous mystery wanting of fuller, deeper appropriation on the part of the Church, in all of its local expressions.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 191.

² Kathryn Tanner, *Christ is Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140.

Having said this, however, Volf and Tanner start from significantly different places, and rather ironically so. Volf has a twofold concern for the Free Church tradition. First of all, his choice of the Catholic Joseph Ratzinger and the Orthodox John Zizioulas as ecclesiological sparring partners underscores his commitment to herald and embolden the legitimacy of the Free Church in the face of ages-old opposition from the established, institutional hierarchies. Secondly, he seeks a “correspondence between the church and Trinity [that has] remained largely alien to the Free Church Tradition.”³ This absence Volf deems understandable, given the tradition’s ecclesiastical nature of self-determination: “Were the divine persons, as do converted Christians into a fellowship...one would have not a Trinity, but rather tritheism.”⁴ He further elucidates this point by referencing the religious libertarian John Smyth (1570-1612) who understood the church’s theological foundation as fundamentally christological, or Christ-centered, in a way that limits, and ultimately deprives the Free Church of the Trinity’s benefits, so to speak.

Conversely, Tanner sees Christ *as the key*, not only to understanding the Trinity, but to *experience* the intimacy - and empowerment - of its fellowship. As Tanner puts it, “[Jesus] is not just the prototype for our relations with the first and third persons of the trinity...[Jesus] is our point of access into those relations. We are to take up the very position of the second person of the trinity as that person

³ Volf, Miroslav, 196.

⁴ Ibid

joins our life to its own in the incarnation.⁵” She goes on to say, “What Jesus achieves perfectly and primarily, we will then enjoy through him imperfectly and derivatively.⁶”

This approach reflects Tanner’s keen interest in the taxonomy of the Trinity, that is, how each of the three persons are related or ordered, one to the other. For example, she goes to great scripturally-based lengths to illuminate how Father, Son and Holy Spirit each possess distinct roles (e.g. “...the son prays to the Father and the Father does not pray to the son”⁷). In this way, she remains in keeping with the classical tenets of trinitarian theology. It is important, however, to note that this interest is not so much about rank or hierarchy as it is about the perfect complementarity of the tri-persons, a philosophical posture I believe she shares in common, at least in broad strokes, with Volf.

However, Volf’s postulation of trinitarian complementarity takes rank and hierarchy out of the equation entirely by arguing for a perichoretic personhood of the trinity, that is, that the three persons exist as One by virtue of their “reciprocal interiority.”⁸ This perspective represents a radical departure from the classical trinitarian paradigm of one-substance-three personas by positing that the mutual indwelling of the three persons *is* the substance. God is inherently communal.

⁵ Tanner, Kathryn, 142.

⁶ Ibid, 143

⁷ Ibid, 150

⁸ Volf, Miroslav, 209

For Volf, this understanding God has profound implications for the church. Said in the negative, the order, governance and, therefore, life of a local congregation would not be prescribed (and stifled) by uniformity under a monolist, central authority. Said positively, leadership would be exercised collegially, recognizing that the “various gifts, services, and activities that all Christians have correspond to the divine multiplicity.”⁹ Enacted, the Free Church would find herself more fully living out her ecclesiastical ideals. More importantly, the church, “in communion with the triune God, will reflect perfect divine love.”¹⁰

Tanner also envisions a fuller ecclesial embodiment of the Triune God, but through our enjoining with Jesus Christ, and through the sacraments in particular. In being baptized, for example, the scriptures tell us that we are not only made one with Christ, but we receive the very same Spirit that “animated and empowered his own life of service to the Father’s mission.”¹¹ The Eucharist then feeds us, on a regular rhythm of “ascent and descent, going to the Father and receiving from him, through Christ in the power of the Spirit.”¹² In intimate concert with the Trinity made possible in Christ, the congregation receives all grace and gifts for mission.

Although Tanner and Volf offer different paradigms for the trinity’s inter-relations, their shared passion for church’s triune witness is without doubt.

⁹ Volf, Miroslav, 218

¹⁰ Ibid, 220

¹¹ Tanner, Kathryn, 199.

¹² Ibid